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American Rhythms | Each of us can help Darfur: Just let the horror seep in

By Jane Eisner

I had, until now, shied away from writing about the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan, on the weak but justifiable grounds that my job is to opine about national issues, and this was something happening on a distant continent.

Now I feel too guilty to stay silent.

Guilt works in mysterious ways, but not always in mysterious places. It's an especially potent tool in houses of worship, where we are more apt to dwell on how we *should* act rather than rehearse the list of easy excuses for inaction.

Guilt might have motivated the U.S. Senate to pass a resolution designating last weekend a National Weekend of Prayer and Reflection to draw attention to Darfur. When public officials don't do all they can to confront a humanitarian crisis, it's always handy to pass a resolution.

Guilt might even have motivated some of the nation's clergy to remind congregants that if we are all, indeed, God's children, then we can scarcely sit by as 300,000 people *or more* are slaughtered and nearly two million displaced.

I can attest: Guilt works. I heard this very message from my rabbi Saturday, and my conscience hasn't left me alone since. I can no longer pretend it's not in my job description to express outrage and demand action against what is being called the worst genocide since World War II.

That historical analogy weighs heavily on Jewish people, and on Monday, they responded in kind. Just about every major religious and communal Jewish group in the nation signed a document calling upon President Bush to promote immediate and comprehensive international intervention in Darfur.

"What excuse do we have?" asks Deborah E. Lipstadt, the Emory University historian who has detailed how the Holocaust was downplayed and denied as millions of Jews and others were murdered in Europe.

"If we're going to talk about the Holocaust, about what was, then we have to be concerned about what is or we lose all moral credibility."

The cause of the global indifference to the murder of so many and the rape, starvation and displacement of so many more, can be rationalized, if not accepted. It's happening far away in Africa, it's tribal, it's Muslim against Muslim, it's not on television every night because the Sudanese government strictly controls the media and because we'd all rather watch something else.



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Compassion fatigue plays a role - didn't we all just raise money for tsunami relief? - and so does the desolate sense that there's not much we can do from here. But there is much we can do: Push Congress and the President, for instance, to allocate sufficient resources for the African peacekeepers so desperately needed in the region. A \$50 million appropriation approved in the Senate yesterday wasn't nearly enough.

The more sweeping Darfur Accountability Act, which included sanctions and the naming of a presidential envoy, passed the Senate but was stopped in the House. A new version is slowly making its way through the legislative process, shepherded by the strangest of bedfellows: conservative Sen. Sam Brownback (R., Kan.) and liberal Sen. Jon Corzine (D., N.J.).

"You have people on the left and right who are responding because of moral concerns, not political concerns," Corzine said yesterday. "We just want to get the resources to do what's necessary to alleviate this suffering."

If these two unlikely allies can find common cause, it behooves the rest of us to follow their example. At a time when the role of religion in the public square is subject to such intense scrutiny, wouldn't it be a welcome change to see faith communities from across the spectrum unite on this one, urgent appeal?

"The words of Jesus are pretty clear," says Bill Heinemann, who spoke Sunday of Darfur at his Quaker meeting in Newtown, Bucks County. "I don't think he was fooling around when he said 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

For those, like myself, who have come late to this issue, who have read about it and nodded in concern but haven't *felt* it with that mixture of guilt and outrage that prompts action, there still is time. Unfortunately. Promises of a cease-fire notwithstanding, the suffering in Darfur continues.

"When you pray, you move your feet," Corzine told me. Then let us move. To paraphrase an old Jewish teaching: We are not required to complete the work, but neither may we desist from it.

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